The Mermaid Wife

Migratory legends of Christiansen type 4080 and related tales
translated and/or edited by

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The Captured Mermaid

Isle of Man

As at my first coming to the island, I was extremely sollicitous in diving into the manners and humour of a people, which seemed so altogether new, and different from all the other Europeans I had ever seen; I went to Port Iron, the first season for fishery, after my arrival: where, falling into discourse with some of the inhabitants, I had an account given me, which, I think, would be doing something of injustice to the publick to conceal.

I believe there are few people, who have not heard of *mermaids* and *mermen*, tho' I never met with any, who looked on them as any thing more than the chimerical *Tritons* and *Amphitrites* of the poets, till accidentally falling in company with an old Manks man, who had used the sea many years, he told me he had frequently seen them, and endeavoured to make me believe his assertion true; by a thousand oaths and imprecations. I happening to mention this at Port Iron, they seemed to wonder at my incredulity, and gave me the following narration:

> In the time, said they, that Oliver Cromwell usurped the protectorship of England, few or no ships resorted to this island, and that uninterruption and solitude of the sea, gave the *mermen* and *mermaids* (who are enemies to any company but those of their own species) frequent opportunities of visiting the shore, where, in moonlight nights, they have been seen to sit, combing their heads, and playing with each other; but as soon as they perceived any body coming near them, jumped into the water, and were out of sight immediately.
>
> Some people, who lived near the coast, having observed their behaviour, spread large nets, made of small, but very strong cords, upon the ground, and watched at a convenient distance for their approach. The night they had laid this snare, but one happened to come, who was no sooner set down, than those who held the strings of the net, drew them with a sudden jirk, and enclosed their prize beyond all possibility of escaping.
>
> On opening the net, and examining their captive, by the largeness of her breasts, and the beauty of her complexion, it was found to be a female; nothing, continued my author, could be more lovely, more exactly formed, in all parts above the waist, resembling a compleat young woman, but below that, all fish, with fins, and a huge spreading tail.
>
> She was carried to a house, and used very tenderly, nothing but liberty being denied. But tho' they set before her the best provision the place afforded, she would not be prevailed on to eat, or drink, neither could they get a word from her, tho' they knew these creatures were not without the gift of speech, having heard them talk to each other, when sitting regaling themselves on the seaside.
>
> They kept her in this manner three days, but perceiving she began to look very ill with fasting, and fearing some calamity would befall the island if they should keep her till the died, they agreed to let her return to the element she liked best, and the third night set open their door; which, as soon as she beheld, she raised herself from the place where she was then lying, and glided with incredible swiftness, on her tail, to the seaside.
>
> They followed at a distance, and saw her plunge into the water, where she was met by a great number of her own species, one of whom asked what she had observed among the people of the earth; nothing very wonderful, answer'd she, but that they are so very ignorant, as to throw away the water they have boiled eggs in. This question, and her reply, they told me, was distinctly heard by those who stood on the shore to watch what passed.

- Source (books.google.com): George Waldron, *The History and Description of the Isle of Man* (London: W. Bickerton, 1744), pp. 105-108.
- Source (Internet Archive): George Waldron, *The History and Description of the Isle of Man* (London: W. Bickerton, 1744), pp. 106-108.
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The Mermaid and the Shepherd

Isle of Man

In a creek, between two high rocks, which overlook the sea on this side of the island, they tell you also, that *mermen* and *mermaids* have been frequently seen. Many surprizing stories of these amphibious creatures have I been told here, as well as at Port Iron; but the strangest of all, is this:

> A very beautiful *mermaid*, say they, became so much enamour'd of a young man who used to tend his sheep on these rocks, that she would frequently come and sit down by him, bring him pieces of coral, fine pearls, and what were yet greater curiosities, and of infinitely more value, had they fallen into the hands of a person who knew their worth, shells of various forms and figures, and so glorious in their colour, and chine, that they even dazzled the eye that looked upon them.
>
> Her presents were accompanied with smiles, pattings of the cheek, and all the marks of a most sincere and tender passion; but one day throwing her arms more than ordinarily eager about him, he began to be frighted, that she had a design to draw him into the sea, and struggled till he disengaged himself, and then ran a good many paces from her; which behaviour she resented so highly, it seems, that she took up a stone, and after throwing it at him, glided into her more proper element, and was never seen on land again.
>
> But the poor youth, tho' but slightly hit with the stone, felt from that moment so excessive a pain in his bowels, that the cry was never out of his mouth for seven days, at the end of which he died.

- Source (books.google.com): George Waldron, *The History and Description of the Isle of Man* (London: W. Bickerton, 1744), pp. 130-32.
- Source (Internet Archive): George Waldron, *The History and Description of the Isle of Man* (London: W. Bickerton, 1744), pp. 130-32.
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The Mermaid Wife

Shetland Islands

A story is told of an inhabitant of Unst, who, in walking on the sandy margin of a voe [a deep inlet], saw a number of mermen and mermaids dancing by moonlight, and several sealskins strewed beside them on the ground. At his approach they immediately fled to secure their garbs, and, taking upon themselves the form of seals, plunged immediately into the sea. But as the Shetlander perceived that one skin lay close to his feet, he snatched it up, bore it swiftly away, and placed it in concealment.

On returning to the shore he met the fairest damsel that was ever gazed upon by mortal eyes, lamenting the robbery, by which she had become an exile from her submarine friends, and a tenant of the upper world. Vainly she implored the restitution of her property. The man had drunk deeply of love, and was inexorable; but he offered her protection beneath his roof as his betrothed spouse. The merlady, perceiving that she must become an inhabitant of the earth, found that she could not do better than accept of the offer.

This strange attachment subsisted for many years, and the couple had several children. The Shetlander's love for his merwife was unbounded, but his affection was coldly returned. The lady would often steal alone to the desert strand, and, on a signal being given, a large seal would make his appearance, with whom she would hold, in an unknown tongue, an anxious conference.

Years had thus glided away, when it happened that one of the children, in the course of his play, found concealed beneath a stack of corn a seal's skin; and, delighted with the prize, he ran with it to his mother. Her eyes glistened with rapture -- she gazed upon it as her own -- as the means by which she could pass through the ocean that led to her native home. She burst forth into an ecstasy of joy, which was only moderated when she beheld her children, whom she was now about to leave; and, after hastily embracing them, she fled with all speed towards the seaside.

The husband immediately returned, learned the discovery that had taken place, ran to overtake his wife, but only arrived in time to see her transformation of shape completed -- to see her, in the form of a seal, bound from the ledge of a rock into the sea. The large animal of the same kind with whom she had held a secret converse soon appeared, and evidently congratulated her, in the most tender manner, on her escape. But before she dived to unknown depths, she cast a parting glance at the wretched Shetlander, whose despairing looks excited in her breast a few transient feelings of commiseration.

"Farewell!" said she to him "and may all good attend you. I loved you very well when I resided upon earth, but I always loved my first husband much better."

- Unst is the northernmost of the Shetland Islands.
- Source: [C. J. T.], *Folk-Lore and Legends: Scotland* (London: W. W. Gibbings, 1889), pp. 86-88.
- This legend is reprinted in George Douglas, *Scottish Fairy and Folk Tales* (London: Walter Scott, [1901]), pp. 153-55. (Hathitrust).
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The Silkie Wife

Shetland and Orkney Islands

Those in the Shetland and Orkney Islands who know no better, are persuaded that the seals, or silkies, as they call them, can doff their coverings at times, and disport themselves as men and women.

A fisher once turning a ridge of rock, discovered a beautiful bit of green turf adjoining the shingle, sheltered by rocks on the landward side, and over this turf and shingle two beautiful women chasing each other. Just at the man's feet lay two sealskins, one of which he took up to examine it. The women, catching sight of him, screamed out, and ran to get possession of the skins. One seized the article on the ground, donned it in a thrice, and plunged into the sea; the other wrung her hands, cried, and begged the fisher to restore her property; but he wanted a wife, and would not throw away the chance. He wooed her so earnestly and lovingly, that she put on some woman's clothing which he brought her from his cottage, followed him home, and became his wife.

Some years later, when their home was enlivened by the presence of two children, the husband, awakening one night, heard voices in conversation from the kitchen. Stealing softly to the room door, he heard his wife talking in a low tone with someone outside the window. The interview was just at an end, and he had only time to ensconce himself in bed, when his wife was stealing across the room. He was greatly disturbed, but determined to do or say nothing till he should acquire further knowledge.

Next evening, as he was returning home by the strand, he spied a male and female phoca sprawling on a rock a few yards out at sea.

The rougher animal, raising himself on his tail and fins, thus addressed the astonished man in the dialect spoken in these islands, "You deprived me of her whom I was to make my companion; and it was only yesternight that I discovered her outer garment, the loss of which obliged her to be your wife. I bear no malice, as you were kind to her in your own fashion; besides, my heart is too full of joy to hold any malice. Look on your wife for the last time."

The other seal glanced at him with all the shyness and sorrow she could force into her now uncouth features; but when the bereaved husband rushed toward the rock to secure his lost treasure, she and her companion were in the water on the other side of it in a moment, and the poor fisherman was obliged to return sadly to his motherless children and desolate home.

- Source: *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*, collected and narrated by Patrick Kennedy (London: Macmillan and Company, 1866), pp. 122-24.
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Herman Perk and the Seal

Shetland Islands

It was believed at one time that the Finns [Sami] frequently came over to Shetland taking the form of seals. In this connection a remarkable tale was told in Papa Stoor ["Big Priest" Island].

The islanders were often in the habit of visiting the outlying Vee Skerries for the purpose of hunting seals. On one occasion a man named Herman Perk, accompanied by others, left for the skerries in a small boat. When they arrived there Herman was landed on the rocks, but his companions remained in the boat to prevent it getting damaged. It happened, however, that a severe storm burst without warning, and the men found after several daring attempts, that it was quite impossible to get Herman off again. The storm was increasing in severity, and latterly they were compelled, for their own safety, to attempt getting back to Papa. After a terrible passage they succeeded in reaching the island, and their first act was to proceed to the home of their ill-fated companion to tell his folk what had befallen him. Imagine their surprise, however, on finding him comfortably seated at his fireside.

Herman had a strange story to tell them. Shortly after the boat left the skerries, he observed a large seal coming up, and as he watched its progress, it suddenly raised itself in the angry sea, and he became aware that it was speaking to him.

"Herman Perk," it said, "you have destroyed many of our folks in your time, yet nevertheless if you will undertake to do me a service, I will carry you in safety to Papa tonight. Some time ago my wife Maryara was made captive in Papa. Her skin is now hanging in the *skio* (hut for drying fish) at Nortoos, and without it she cannot return with me to Finmark [in northern Norway]. It is the third skin from the door, and I wish you to bring it to me."

Herman had readily agreed to this proposition, whereupon he was told to cut two slits in the seal's back as supports for his feet, and then place his arms firmly round the animal's neck. The latter immediately took to the water, and in a remarkably short time Herman had the gratification of landing safely in Papa.

True to his promise, he went to the *skio* indicated, where he found the skin without any difficulty, and carried it down to the beach. The seal was waiting his coming, and at its side was the most beautiful woman he had ever beheld. The seal gave the skin to its lovely companion, and then apparently left its own body behind, and the happy pair immediately took their departure over the sea.

The following morning Herman went again to Nortoos. There, sure enough, lay the skin of a large seal, and it had two cuts behind the flippers. He placed it where he had taken the other from.

After that Herman was a prosperous man, but he was never known to visit the Vee Skerries again.

- Source (books.google.com): John Nicolson, *Some Folk-Tales and Legends of Shetland*, (Edinburgh: Thomas Allan and Sons, 1920), pp. 62-63.
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The Goodman of Wastness

Scotland (Orkney Islands)

Versions of the story I am now to tell were at one time rife in every Orkney island:

> It happened one day that the goodman of Wastness was down on the ebb (that portion of the shore left dry at low water) when he saw at a little distance a number of selkie folk on a flat rock. Some were lying sunning themselves while others jumped and played about in great glee. They were all naked and had skins as white as his own. The rock on which they sported had deep water on its seaward side and on its shore side a shallow pool.
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> The goodman of Wastness crept unseen till he got to the edge of the shallow pool; he then rose and dashed through the pool to the rock on its other side. The alarmed selkie folk seized their seal skins and in mad haste jumped into the sea. Quick as they were the goodman was also quick and he seized one of the skins belonging to an unfortunate damsel who in terror of flight neglected to clutch it as she sprang into the water.
>
> The selkie folk swam out a little distance then turning set up their heads and gazed at the goodman. He noticed that one of them had not the appearance of seals like the rest. He then took the captured skin under his arm and made for home but before he got out of the ebb he heard a most doleful sound of weeping and lamentation behind him. He turned to see a fair woman following him. It was that one of the selkie folk whose seal skin he had taken.
>
> She was a pitiful sight; sobbing in bitter grief holding out both hands in eager supplication while the big tears followed each other down her fair face.
>
> And ever and anon she cried out: "O bonnie man! If there's onie mercy i' thee human breast gae back me skin! I cinno' cinno' cinno' live i' the sea without it. I cinno' cinno' cinno' bide among me ain folk without my ain seal skin. Oh pity a peur distressed forlorn lass gin doo wad ever hope for mercy theesel'!"

The goodman was not too soft-hearted yet he could not help pitying her in her doleful plight. And with his pity came the softer passion of love. His heart that never loved women before was conquered by the sea-nymph's beauty. So after a good deal of higgling and plenty of love-making he wrung from the sea-lass a reluctant consent to live with him as his wife.

She chose this as the least of two evils. Without the skin she could not live in the sea, and he absolutely refused to give up the skin. So the sea-lass went with the goodman and stayed with him for many days being a thrifty frugal and kindly good wife.

She bore her goodman seven children four boys and three lasses and there were not bonnier lasses or statelier boys in all the isle. And though the goodwife of Wastness appeared happy and was sometimes merry yet there seemed at times to be a weight on her heart; and many a long longing look did she fix on the sea. She taught her bairns many a strange song that nobody on earth ever heard before. Albeit she was a thing of the sea yet the goodman led a happy life with her.

Now it chanced one fine day that the goodman of Wastness and his three eldest sons were off in his boat to the fishing. Then the goodwife sent three of the other children to the ebb to gather limpits and wilks. The youngest lass had to stay at home for she had a beelan (suppurating) foot. The goodwife then began under the pretence of house-cleaning a determined search for her long-lost skin. She searched up and she searched down; she searched but and she searched ben; she searched out and she searched in but never a skin could she find while the sun wore to the west.

The youngest lass sat in a stool with her sore foot on a cringlo (a low straw stool).

She says to her mother: "Mam what are doo leukan for?"

"O bairn deu no tell," said her mother, "but I'm leukan for a bonnie skin tae mak a rivlin (shoe or sandal) that wad ceur thee sare fit."

Says the lass: "May be I ken whar hid is. Ae day whin ye war a' oot an' ded tought I war sleepan i' the bed he teuk a bonnie skin doon; he gloured at it a peerie minute dan folded hid and led hid up under dae aisins abeun dae bed." (Under the aisins -- space left by slope of roof over wall-head when not beam-filled.)

When her mother heard this she rushed to the place and pulled out her long-concealed skin.

"Fareweel peerie buddo!" (a term of endearment), said she to the child and ran out.

She rushed to the shore flung on her skin and plunged into the sea with a wild cry of joy. A male of the selkie folk there met and greeted her with every token of delight. The goodman was rowing home and saw them both from his boat.

His lost wife uncovered her face, and thus she cried to him: "Goodman o' Wastness fareweel tae thee! I liked dee weel doo war geud tae me; bit I lo'e better me man o' the sea!"

And that was the last he ever saw or heard of his bonnie wife. Often did he wander on the seashore hoping to meet his lost love, but never more saw he her fair face.

- Source (books.google.com): A. W. Cornelius Hallen, *Scottish Antiquary; or, Northern Notes and Queries*, vol. 7 (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1893), pp. 173-75.
- Source (Internet Archive): A. W. Cornelius Hallen, *Scottish Antiquary; or, Northern Notes and Queries*, vol. 7 (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1893), pp. 173-75.

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The Mermaid of Lochinver

Scotland

A mermaid fell in love with a fisherman of Lochinver. Her lover was enamoured, but he had heard how youths ensnared by mermaids had found a watery grave.

It became necessary then to make his own terms, and to arrange matters so as to secure himself. To rule a mermaid it is necessary to possess yourself, not of her person, but of the pouch and belt which mermaids wear. This carries the glass, comb, and other articles well-known to be indispensable to the lady's comfort, but also as a sort of life-preserver helps them to swim.

By fair means or foul this cautious swain got hold of the pouch, and the mermaid became in consequence his bride and his bonds-woman. There was little happiness in such a union for the poor little wife. She wearied of a husband, who, to tell the truth, thought more of himself than of her.

He never took her out in his boat when the sun danced on the sea, but left her at home with the cows, and on a croft which was to her a sort of prison. Her silky hair tangled. The dogs teased her. Her tail was really in the way. She wept incessantly while rude people mocked at her. Nor was there any prospect of escape after nine months of this wretched life. Her powers of swimming depended on her pouch, and that was lost. What was more, she now suspected the fisherman of having cozened her out of it.

One day the fisherman was absent, and the labourers were pulling down a stack of corn. The poor mermaid watched them weeping, when to her great joy she espied her precious pouch and belt, which had been built in and buried among the sheaves. She caught it, and leapt into the sea, there to enjoy a delicious freedom.

J. MacLeod, Laxford.

- Source (books.google.com): Miss [Charlotte Louisa Hawkins] Dempster, "The Folk-Lore of Sutherlandshire," *The Folk-Lore Journal*, vol. 6, part 3 (July to September 1888), no. 14, pp. 165-66.
- Source (Internet Archive): Miss [Charlotte Louisa Hawkins] Dempster, "The Folk-Lore of Sutherlandshire," *The Folk-Lore Journal*, vol. 6, part 3 (July to September 1888), no. 14, pp. 165-66.
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The Sealskin

Iceland

Early one morning before people had gotten up, a man from Myrdal in the east was walking past some cliffs when he came to the entrance to a cave. He could hear that there was merrymaking and dancing going on inside the hill, and outside he saw a large number of sealskins. He picked up one of them, took it home, and locked it in his trunk. Some time later, in the course of the day, he went back to the cave's entrance. A beautiful young girl was sitting there. She was entirely naked and crying bitterly. She was the seal to whom the skin belonged that the man had taken. The man gave the girl some clothing, comforted her, and took her home with him.

Later she came to accept him, but never got along very well with other people. She would often just sit there and look out to sea. After some time the man took her as his wife. They lived well together and had many children.

The peasant hid the skin, locking it securely in his trunk, and he carried the key with him everywhere he went.

Many years later he rowed out fishing and forgot the key at home under his pillow. However, others say that the peasant went to a Christmas service with his people, but that his wife had been sick and was unable to go with them. They say that he forgot to take the key out of the pocket of his everyday clothes when he changed. When he arrived home that evening the trunk was open, and his wife had disappeared with the skin. She had found the key, out of curiosity looked through the trunk, and found the skin.

She could not resist the temptation. She said farewell to her children, put on the skin, and threw herself into the sea.

Before the woman jumped into the sea, it is reported that she said:

> This I want, and yet I want it not, --
> Seven children have I at the bottom of the sea,
> Seven children have I as well here above.

It is said that this touched the peasant's heart. After this, when he rowed out fishing, a seal often swam around his boat, and it seemed that tears were running from its eyes. From this time on he was always successful catching fish, and luck often came to his beach.

People frequently saw this couple's children walking on the beach while a seal swam along out in the sea accompanying them. It would throw colorful fish and pretty shells to them.

But the mother never again returned to land.

- Source (books.google.com): Åge Avenstrup and Elisabeth Treitel, "Das Seehundsfell," *Isländische Märchen und Volkssagen* (Berlin: Axel Juncker Verlag, 1919), pp. 258-59.
- Source (Internet Archive): Åge Avenstrup and Elisabeth Treitel, "Das Seehundsfell," *Isländische Märchen und Volkssagen* (Berlin: Axel Juncker Verlag, 1919), pp. 258-59.
- This legend in the original Icelandic:
    - Books.google.com: Jón Árnason, "Selshamurinn," *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1862), pp. 632-33.
    - Internet Archive: Jón Árnason, "Selshamurinn," *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1862), pp. 632-33.
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Touched by Iron

Wales

The son of a farmer on Drws Coed farm was one foggy day looking after his father's sheep, when crossing a marshy meadow he beheld a little lady behind some rising ground. She had yellow hair, blue eyes and rosy

cheeks. He approached her, and asked permission to converse; whereupon she smiled sweetly and said to him, "Idol of my hopes, you have come at last!"

They there and then began to "keep company," and met each other daily here and there along the farm meadows. His intentions were honorable; he desired her to marry him. He was sometimes absent for days together, no one knew where, and his friends whispered about that he had been witched.

Around the Turf Lake (Llyn y Dywarchen) was a grove of trees, and under one of these one day the fairy promised to be his. The consent of her father was now necessary. One moonlight night an appointment was made to meet in this wood. The father and daughter did not appear till the moon had disappeared behind the hill. Then they both came. The fairy father immediately gave his consent to the marriage, on one condition, namely, that her future husband should never hit her with iron.

"If ever thou dost touch her flesh with iron she shall be no more thine, but she shall return to her own."

They were married -- a good-looking pair. Large sums of money were brought by her, the night before the wedding, to Drws Coed. The shepherd lad became wealthy, had several handsome children, and they were very happy.

After some years, they were one day out riding, when her horse sank in a deep mire, and by the assistance of her husband, in her hurry to remount, she was struck on her knee by the stirrup of the saddle. Immediately voices were heard singing on the brow of the hill, and she disappeared, leaving all her children behind.

She and her mother devised a plan by which she could see her beloved, but as she was not allowed to walk the earth with man, they floated a large turf on the lake, and on this turf she stood for hours at a time holding converse with her husband. This continued until his death.

- Source: Wirt Sikes, *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends, and Traditions*, 2nd edition (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1880), pp. 44-45.
- Sikes does not give this account a title.
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The Mermaid of Zennor

Cornwall

Zennor folks tell the following story, which, according to them, accounts for a singular carving on a bench-end in their church.

Hundreds of years ago a very beautiful and richly attired lady attended service in Zennor Church occasionally -- now and then she went to Morvah also; -- her visits were by no means regular, -- often long intervals would elapse between them.

Yet whenever she came the people were enchanted with her good looks and sweet singing. Although Zennor folks were remarkable for their fine psalmody, she excelled them all; and they wondered how, after the scores of years that they had seen her, she continued to look so young and fair. No one knew whence she came nor whither she went; yet many watched her as far as they could see from Tregarthen Hill.

She took some notice of a fine young man, called Mathey Trewella, who was the best singer in the parish. He once followed her, but he never returned; after that she was never more seen in Zennor Church, and it might not

have been known to this day who or what she was but for the merest accident.

One Sunday morning a vessel cast anchor about a mile from Pendower Cove; soon after a mermaid came close alongside and hailed the ship. Rising out of the water as far as her waist, with her yellow hair floating around her, she told the captain that she was returning from church, and requested him to trip his anchor just for a minute, as the fluke of it rested on the door of her dwelling, and she was anxious to get in to her children.

Others say that while she was out on the ocean a-fishing of a Sunday morning, the anchor was dropped on the trap-door which gave access to her submarine abode. Finding, on her return, how she was hindered from opening her door, she begged the captain to have the anchor raised that she might enter her dwelling to dress her children and be ready in time for church.

However it may be, her polite request had a magical effect upon the sailors, for they immediately "worked with a will," hove anchor and set sail, not wishing to remain a moment longer than they could help near her habitation. Sea-faring men, who understood most about mermaids, regarded their appearance as a token that bad luck was near at hand. It was believed they could take such shapes as suited their purpose, and that they had often allured men to live with them.

When Zennor folks learnt that a mermaid dwelt near Pendower, and what she had told the captain, they concluded it was this sea-lady who had visited their church, and enticed Trewella to her abode. To commemorate these somewhat unusual events they had the figure she bore -- when in her ocean home -- carved in holy-oak, which may still be seen.

- Source (books.google.com): William Bottrell, *Traditions and Hearthwide Stories of West Cornwall*, second series (Penzance: Printed for the author by Beare and Son, 1873), pp. 288-89.
- Source (Internet Archive): William Bottrell, *Traditions and Hearthwide Stories of West Cornwall*, second series (Penzance: Printed for the author by Beare and Son, 1873), pp. 288-89.
- Link to the *Wikipedia* article Mermaid of Zennor.
- The mermaid carving on the bench-end in St. Senara's church in Zennor can be seen to this day.
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Tom Moore and the Seal Woman

Ireland

> Apropos of the following tale, I may say: The intermarriage with and descent of men from beings not human touches upon one of the most interesting and important points in primitive belief. Totemism among savage races in our day, and descent from the gods in antiquity are the best examples of this belief; derived from it, in all probability but remotely, are family escutcheons with their animals and birds and the emblematic beasts and birds of nations, such as the Roman eagle, the British lion, the American eagle, the Russian bear. The Roman eagle and the wolf which suckled Romulus may have been totems, if not for the Romans, at least for some earlier people. The lion, eagle, and bear of England, America, and Russia are of course not totemic, though adopted in imitation of people who, if they had not totems, had as national emblems birds or beasts that at some previous period were real totems for some social body.
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> There is a tale in Scotland concerning people of the clan MacCodrum, who were seals in the daytime, but men and women at night. No man of the MacCodrums, it is said, would kill a seal. The

MacCodrums are mentioned in Gaelic as "Clann Mhic Codruim nan rón" (Clan MacCodrum of the seals).

In the village of Kilshanig, two miles northeast of Castlegregory, there lived at one time a fine, brave young man named Tom Moore, a good dancer and singer. 'Tis often he was heard singing among the cliffs and in the fields of a night.

Tom's father and mother died, and he was alone in the house and in need of a wife. One morning early, when he was at work near the strand, he saw the finest woman ever seen in that part of the kingdom, sitting on a rock, fast asleep. The tide was gone from the rocks then, and Tom was curious to know who was she or what brought her, so he walked toward the rock.

"Wake up!" cried Tom to the woman. "If the tide comes 'twill drown you."

She raised her head and only laughed. Tom left her there, but as he was going he turned every minute to look at the woman. When he came back be caught the spade, but couldn't work; he had to look at the beautiful woman on the rock. At last the tide swept over the rock. He threw the spade down and away to the strand with him, but she slipped into the sea and he saw no more of her that time.

Tom spent the day cursing himself for not taking the woman from the rock when it was God that sent her to him. He couldn't work out the day. He went home.

Tom could not sleep a wink all that night. He was up early next morning and went to the rock. The woman was there. He called to her.

No answer. He went up to the rock. "You may as well come home with me now," said Tom. Not a word from the woman. Tom took the hood from her head and said, "I'll have this!"

The moment be did that she cried, "Give back my hood, Tom Moore!"

"Indeed I will not, for 'twas God sent you to me, and now that you have speech I'm well satisfied!" And taking her by the arm he led her to the house. The woman cooked breakfast, and they sat down together to eat it.

"Now," said Tom, "in the name of God you and I'll go to the priest and get married, for the neighbors around here are very watchful; they'd be talking." So after breakfast they went to the priest, and Tom asked him to marry them.

"Where did you get the wife?" asked the priest.

Tom told the whole story. When the priest saw Tom was so anxious to marry be charged £5, and Tom paid the money. He took the wife home with him, and she was as good a woman as ever went into a man's house. She lived with Tom seven years, and had three sons and two daughters.

One day Tom was plowing, and some part of the plow rigging broke. He thought there were bolts on the loft at home, so he climbed up to get them. He threw down bags and ropes while he was looking for the bolts, and what should he throw down but the hood which he took from the wife seven years before. She saw it the moment it fell, picked it up, and hid it. At that time people heard a great seal roaring out in the sea.

"Ah," said Tom's wife, "that's my brother looking for me."

Some men who were hunting killed three seals that day. All the women of the village ran down to the strand to look at the seals, and Tom's wife with the others. She began to moan, and going up to the dead seals she spoke some words to each and then cried out, "Oh, the murder!"

When they saw her crying the men said, "We'll have nothing more to do with these seals."

So they dug a great hole, and the three seals were put into it and covered. But some thought in the night, "'Tis a great shame to bury those seals, after all the trouble in taking them." Those men went with shovels and dug up the earth, but found no trace of the seals.

All this time the big seal in the sea was roaring. Next day when Tom was at work his wife swept the house, put everything in order, washed the children and combed their hair; then, taking them one by one, she kissed each. She went next to the rock, and, putting the hood on her head, gave a plunge. That moment the big seal rose and roared so that people ten miles away could hear him. Tom's wife went away with the seal swimming in the sea. All the five children that she left had webs between their fingers and toes, halfway to the tips.

The descendants of Tom Moore and the seal woman are living near Castlegregory to this day, and the webs are not gone yet from between their fingers and toes, though decreasing with each generation.

- Source: Jeremiah Curtin, *Tales of Fairies and of the Ghost World Collected from Oral Tradition in South-West Munster* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1895), pp. 150-54.
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The Lady of Gollerus

Ireland

On the shore of Smerwick harbor, one fine summer's morning, just at daybreak, stood Dick Fitzgerald "shoghing the dudeen," which may be translated, smoking his pipe. The sun was gradually rising behind the lofty Brandon, the dark sea was getting green in the light, and the mists clearing away out of the valleys went rolling and curling like the smoke from the corner of Dick's mouth.

"'Tis just the pattern of a pretty morning," said Dick, taking the pipe from between his lips, and looking towards the distant ocean, which lay as still and tranquil as a tomb of polished marble. "Well, to be sure," continued he, after a pause, "'tis mighty lonesome to be talking to one's self by way of company, and not to have another soul to answer one -- nothing but the child of one's own voice, the echo! I know this, that if I had the luck, or maybe the misfortune," said Dick, with a melancholy smile, "to have the woman, it would not be this way with me! And what in the wide world is a man without a wife? He's no more, surely, than a bottle without a drop of drink in it, or dancing without music, or the left leg of a scissors, or a fishing line without a hook, or any other matter that is no ways complete. Is it not so?" said Dick Fitzgerald, casting his eyes towards a rock upon the strand, which, though it could not speak, stood up as firm and looked as bold as ever Kerry witness did.

But what was his astonishment at beholding, just at the foot of that rock, a beautiful young creature combing her hair, which was of a sea-green color; and now the salt water shining on it, appeared, in the morning light, like melted butter upon cabbage.

Dick guessed at once that she was a merrow, although he had never seen one before, for he spied the *cohuleen druith*, or little enchanted cap, which the sea people use for diving down into the ocean, lying upon the strand near her; and he had heard that if once he could possess himself of the cap, she would lose the power of going away into the water; so he seized it with all speed, and she, hearing the noise, turned her head about as natural as any Christian.

When the merrow saw that her little diving cap was gone, the salt tears -- doubly salt, no doubt, from her -- came trickling down her cheeks, and she began a low mournful cry with just the tender voice of a newborn infant. Dick, although he knew well enough what she was crying for, determined to keep the *cohuleen druith*, let her cry never so much, to see what luck would come out of it. Yet he could not help pitying her; and when the dumb

thing looked up in his face, and her cheeks all moist with tears, 'twas enough to make anyone feel, let alone Dick, who had ever and always, like most of his countrymen, a mighty tender heart of his own.

"Don't cry, my darling," said Dick Fitzgerald; but the merrow, like any bold child, only cried the more for that.

Dick sat himself down by her side, and took hold of her hand, by way of comforting her. 'Twas in no particular an ugly hand, only there was a small web between the fingers, as there is in a duck's foot; but 'twas as thin and as white as the skin between egg and shell.

"What's your name, my darling?" says Dick, thinking to make her conversant with him; but he got no answer; and he was certain sure now, either that she could not speak, or did not understand him. He therefore squeezed her hand in his, as the only way he had of talking to her. It's the universal language; and there's not a woman in the world, be she fish or lady, that does not understand it.

The merrow did not seem much displeased at this mode of conversation; and, making an end of her whining all at once, "Man," says she, looking up in Dick Fitzgerald's face, "Man, will you eat me?"

"By all the red petticoats and check aprons between Dingle and Tralee," cried Dick, jumping up in amazement, "I'd as soon eat myself, my jewel! Is it I eat you, my pet? Now, 'twas some ugly ill-looking thief of a fish put that notion into your own pretty head, with the nice green hair down upon it, that is so cleanly combed out this morning!"

"Man," said the merrow, "what will you do with me, if you won't eat me?"

Dick's thoughts were running on a wife. He saw, at the first glimpse, that she was handsome; but since she spoke, and spoke too like any real woman, he was fairly in love with her. 'Twas the neat way she called him "man" that settled the matter entirely.

"Fish," says Dick, trying to speak to her after her own short fashion. "Fish," says he, "here's my word, fresh and fasting, for you this blessed morning, that I'll make you Mistress Fitzgerald before all the world, and that's what I'll do."

"Never say the word twice." says she. "I'm ready and willing to be yours, Mister Fitzgerald; but stop, if you please, 'till I twist up my hair."

It was some time before she had settled it entirely to her liking, for she guessed, I suppose, that she was going among strangers, where she would be looked at. When that was done, the merrow put the comb in her pocket, and then bent down her head and whispered some words to the water that was close to the foot of the rock.

Dick saw the murmur of the words upon the top of the sea, going out towards the wide ocean, just like a breath of wind rippling along, and, says he, in the greatest wonder, "Is it speaking you are, my darling, to the saltwater?"

"It's nothing else," says she, quite carelessly, "I'm just sending word home to my father, not to be waiting breakfast for me, just to keep him from being uneasy in his mind."

"And who's your father, my duck?" says Dick.

"What!" said the merrow, "Did you never hear of my father? He's the king of the waves, to be sure!"

"And yourself, then, is a real king's daughter?" said Dick, opening his two eyes to take a full and true survey of his wife that was to be. "Oh, I'm nothing else but a made man with you, and a king your father. To be sure he has all the money that's down in the bottom of the sea!"

"Money," repeated the merrow, "what's money?"

"'Tis no bad thing to have when one wants it," replied Dick; "and maybe now the fishes have the understanding to bring up whatever you bid them?"

"Oh! yes," said the merrow, "they bring me what I want."

"To speak the truth," said Dick, "'tis a straw bed I have at home before you, and that, I'm thinking, is no ways fitting for a king's daughter; so if 'twould not be displeasing to you, just to mention, a nice featherbed, with a pair of new blankets -- but what am I talking about? Maybe you have not such things as beds down under the water?"

"By all means," said she, "Mr. Fitzgerald -- plenty of beds at your service. I've fourteen oyster beds of my own, not to mention one just planting for the rearing of young ones."

"You have," says Dick, scratching his head and looking a little puzzled. "'Tis a featherbed I was speaking of, but clearly, yours is the very cut of a decent plan, to have bed and supper so handy to each other, that a person, when they'd have the one, need never ask for the other."

However, bed or no bed, money or no money, Dick Fitzgerald determined to marry the merrow, and the merrow had given her consent. Away they went, therefore, across the strand, from Gollerus to Ballinrunnig, where Father Fitzgibbon happened to be that morning.

"There are two words to this bargain, Dick Fitzgerald," said his Reverence, looking mighty glum. "And is it a fishy woman you'd marry? The Lord preserve us! Send the scaly creature home to her own people, that's my advice to you, wherever she came from."

Dick had the *cohuleen druith* in his hand, and was about to give it back to the merrow, who looked covetously at it, but he thought for a moment, and then, says he, "Please your Reverence, she's a king's daughter."

"If she was the daughter of fifty kings," said Father Fitzgibbon, "I tell you, you can't marry her, she being a fish."

"Please your Reverence," said Dick again, in an undertone, "she is as mild and as beautiful as the moon."

"If she was as mild and as beautiful as the sun, moon, and stars, all put together, I tell you, Dick Fitzgerald," said the priest, stamping his right foot, "you can't marry her, she being a fish!"

"But she has all the gold that's down in the sea only for the asking, and I'm a made man if I marry her; and," said Dick, looking up slyly, "I can make it worth any one's while to do the job."

"Oh! That alters the case entirely," replied the priest. "Why there's some reason now in what you say. Why didn't you tell me this before? Marry her by all means, if she was ten times a fish. Money, you know, is not to be refused in these bad times, and I may as well have the hansel of it as another, that maybe would not take half the pains in counseling you as I have done."

So Father Fitzgibbon married Dick Fitzgerald to the merrow, and like any loving couple, they returned to Gollerus well pleased with each other. Everything prospered with Dick. He was at the sunny side of the world; the merrow made the best of wives, and they lived together in the greatest contentment.

It was wonderful to see, considering where she had been brought up, how she would busy herself about the house, and how well she nursed the children; for, at the end of three years, there were as many young Fitzgeralds -- two boys and a girl.

In short, Dick was a happy man, and so he might have continued to the end of his days, if he had only the sense to take proper care of what he had got. Many another man, however, beside Dick, has not had wit enough to do that.

One day when Dick was obliged to go to Tralee, he left the wife minding the children at home after him, and thinking she had plenty to do without disturbing his fishing tackle.

Dick was no sooner gone than Mrs. Fitzgerald set about cleaning up the house, and chancing to pull down a fishing net, what should she find behind it in a hole in the wall but her own *cohuleen druith.*

She took it out and looked at it, and then she thought of her father the king, and her mother the queen, and her brothers and sisters, and she felt a longing to go back to them.

She sat down on a little stool and thought over the happy days she had spent under the sea; then she looked at her children, and thought on the love and affection of poor Dick, and how it would break his heart to lose her. "But," says she, "he won't lose me entirely, for I'll come back to him again, and who can blame me for going to see my father and my mother after being so long away from them?"

She got up and went towards the door, but came back again to look once more at the child that was sleeping in the cradle. She kissed it gently, and as she kissed it a tear trembled for an instant in her eye and then fell on its rosy cheek. She wiped away the tear, and turning to the eldest little girl, told her to take good care of her brothers, and to be a good child herself until she came back.

The merrow then went down to the strand. The sea was lying calm and smooth, just heaving and glittering in the sun, and she thought she heard a faint sweet singing, inviting her to come down. All her old ideas and feelings came flooding over her mind. Dick and her children were at the instant forgotten, and placing the *cohuleen druith* on her head, she plunged in.

Dick came home in the evening, and missing his wife, he asked Kathelin, his little girl, what had become of her mother, but she could not tell him. He then enquired of the neighbors, and he learned that she was seen going towards the strand with a strange looking thing like a cocked hat in her hand. He returned to his cabin to search for the cohuleen druith. It was gone, and the truth now flashed upon him.

Year after year did Dick Fitzgerald wait, expecting the return of his wife, but he never saw her more. Dick never married again, always thinking that the merrow would sooner or later return to him, and nothing could ever persuade him but that her father the king kept her below by main force; "for," said Dick, "she surely would not of herself give up her husband and her children."

While she was with him, she was so good a wife in every respect, that to this day she is spoken of in the tradition of the country as the pattern for one, under the name of the Lady of Gollerus.

- Source: Thomas Crofton Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1828), pp. 3-13.
- Smerwick Harbor is at the tip of Dingle Peninsula in southwest Ireland. Gollerus is a small village on the eastern side of the harbor.
- Croker gives the name of the enchanted cap as *cohuleen driuth*, but I have preferred the more standard spelling *cohuleen druith.*
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The Mermaid

Ireland

The mermaid lives in the sea, she is like a fish from her waist down and the rest is like a woman.

A story is told about a man who was fishing at the sea, and he saw a beautiful lady sitting on a rock combing her hair. At once he guessed it was a mermaid. She had left her mantle down beside her, and the man stole up to the rock where it was left and took it with him.

When she missed it she followed the man, but as soon as she touched dry land she changed into a human woman. She followed the man to his house, but he would not give her the mantle. She could not go back until she got it, so she married the man.

They had seven children, and one day the youngest boy saw his father put a beautiful mantle into a stack of oats. He told his mother about it. She searched the stack, and when she got it she went to the sea. The seven children followed her, and she changed them into seven stones. Later there were only six to be seen. And it was supposed that it was the boy who told her about the mantle she brought to live with her.

Informant: Michael Walsh, Gowlaun, Co. Mayo.

- Source: dúchas.ie >> The Schools' Collection >> Co. Mayo >> Caonach, pp. 319-320.
- The material on this site is made available under the CC BY-NC 4.0 licence.
- The Schools' Collection is a manuscript collection of folklore compiled by schoolchildren in Ireland in the 1930s.

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Legend of O' Dowd of Inniscrone Castle and the Mermaid

Ireland

One fine summer morning the O'Dowd was walking on the shore and he saw a beautiful mermaid asleep on the rocks. She had long golden hair and a red cloak beside her. O'Dowd took the red cloak and hid it in a stack of turf at the castle. She woke up but as she had not her mermaid cloak, she was a mermaid no longer but was a woman. After this O'Dowd married her and they had seven sons.

The mermaid made O'Dowd promise that he would not go to sea again. He broke the promise and went to sea. When he was gone one of her sons told her that he often saw his father looking at a beautiful red cloak. She knew it was her own and asked him where it was hidden. When she got it she made up her mind to "take" to sea and become a mermaid again. She could not bring her sons with her into the sea as they were half human beings, so with a wave of her red cloak she turned them into seven rocks and so then returned to the sea.

These rocks are to be seen in Scurmore woods, and it is believed that these rocks bleed every seven years if they are tipped with something sharp.

Collector: Connie Carroll, Frankford, Co. Sligo.

- Source: dúchas.ie >> The Schools' Collection >> Co. Sligo >> Mairnéulaigh, p. 309.
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The Mermaid

Ireland

The mermaid is half a woman and half a fish. A mermaid appeared in Ballyheigue a few years ago. A man seeing her on the rocks brought her home. She never spoke while in the house, and she had a little wand called the "slatín sraoideachta." The man took the wand and hid from the mermaid. One day he went to town and his mother was tidying the loft and in the rubbish she found the wand and she threw it down to the kitchen. The mermaid who was in the kitchen found it and she laughed and ran away.

Collector: Nora Mary McCarthy, Lixnaw, Co. Kerry.

- Source: dúchas.ie >> The Schools' Collection >> Co. Kerry >> Clochar na Toirbhirte, Lic Snámha, p. 303.
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Brauhard's Mermaid

Germany

Many years ago a man named Brauhard lived in Lauterberg. He had been far away across the water and had brought home a mermaid, whom he married. Her top half was human, but her bottom half was formed like a fish. She lived in a tub in his house. However, his friends could not stand the malformed woman, and so they finally poisoned her. He did not remarry, and he contributed the money he had received as her dowry to the poor. That is the source of the Brauhard Fund which to this day is administered by the Scharzfeld Jurisdiction for the support of the poor in the surrounding villages.

- Source (books.google.com): A. Kuhn and W. Schwartz, "Brauhards Seejungfer," *Norddeutsche Sagen, Märchen und Gebräuche aus Meklenburg [Mecklenburg], Pommern, der Mark, Sachsen, Thüringen, Braunschweig, Hannover, Oldenburg und Westfalen* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1848), no. 259, pp. 232-33.
- Source (Internet Archive): A. Kuhn and W. Schwartz, "Brauhards Seejungfer," *Norddeutsche Sagen, Märchen und Gebräuche aus Meklenburg [Mecklenburg], Pommern, der Mark, Sachsen, Thüringen, Braunschweig, Hannover, Oldenburg und Westfalen* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1848), no. 259, pp. 232-33.
- Kuhn's and Schwartz's source: "Oral tradition from Steina."
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Links to related sites

Each link opens in a new window. Close the targeted window to return to this page.

- Water Spirit Legends.
- Swan Maidens. Folktales of Aarne-Thompson type 400*, in which a man gains control over a swan maiden by stealing her feathered garb.
- Melusina. Legends about mermaids, water sprites, and forest nymphs who marry mortal men.
- Mermaid, from *Wikipedia*, the free encyclopedia.

Return to D. L. Ashliman's **folktexts**, a library of folktales, folklore, fairy tales, and mythology.

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